

A Chance for Lithuania

Tension has been mounting in Lithuania. So far, Mikhail Gorbachev has been ambiguous, playing brinkmanship. He is in a difficult bind, and he probably hasn't decided which way to go — to try to ease the pain and save face by wriggling out of the imperial problem gradually, or crack down, prove his power and damn the consequences.

His predecessors didn't behave that way. Not for them a sneaky escalation, like America's in Vietnam. In Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, in Afghanistan in 1979, they ordered intervention, kept it secret but gathered their forces, and then moved suddenly with massive power.

Mr. Gorbachev doesn't appear to want that route. The parades of armor and day-by-day seizure of offices in Vilnius are psychological warfare that may be worse than two alternatives — crushing Lithuanian defiance by force or winning the fruits of peaceful accommodation.

A retired Soviet major general, attending an East-West meeting here, said Red Army commanders wouldn't want to move against civilians. They felt the backlash of their recent operations in Tbilisi and Azerbaijan, and cite the party's injunction against using the army for internal missions. Still, they would act if ordered, he said, but "at the right time, not too soon, not too late, that is, when we could get public support."

After all, the experience of Mr. Gorbachev's predecessors also proved that force only works for a while. He is probing for a better way out.

So it is right for the U.S. to respond in kind to his ambiguity. Washington has sent a firm message that a use of force sufficient to put down Lithuania's independence movement, which could only be temporary in any event, would unravel the great diplomatic enterprise that Mr. Gorbachev has begun. It is saying watch out, but not provoking.

Though Mr. Bush may have lost some credibility by his indulgence of China's repression, America's allies and even neutrals are signaling that Lithuania has become a serious test for everybody on the prospects of East-West relations.

The stakes are much too great to be a game for Gorby-friends and Gorby-foes in the West. It is really about the future of Europe and the Soviet Union. Lithuania has become more than a symbol, an issue of whether to assert an abstract principle with passion (and nothing more costly for those who demand immediate Washington recognition).

Critics of the Bush Administration's careful diplomacy seem to put

their own claim to rectitude ahead of Lithuania's achievement of independence. It provokes a question of whether the real aim is to undermine the whole effort to end the cold war.

They have their counterparts in the Soviet Union, people who say "Gorbachev has wasted Socialism, wasted our allies and now is wasting the empire," in the unintentionally vivid English of one Soviet expert.

But it isn't a matter of trying to save him from his enemies. Lithuania is not only a real country with real people, it is a real dilemma for the future of millions of people, inside and outside the Soviet Union. We can't get Mr. Gorbachev out of the corner that he has helped himself into, but we can show how seriously everybody's hopes ride on his finding maneuver room toward a settlement.

Instead of ultimatums and display

Moscow and the U.S. must act carefully.

of armored convoys, Mr. Gorbachev needs to convince the Lithuanians that they can choose independence but that it takes preparation and attention to the enormous problems that course will bring both sides. He may be starting to make headway. Lithuania's leader, Vytautas Landsbergis, who has been putting on a brave show, now says his nation did not expect Moscow to hand power over immediately, which may indicate a willingness to move a step at a time, with less haste and more regard for Soviet preoccupations.

Like it or not, Mr. Gorbachev has launched the decolonization of the last great empire, even though he only started out to reform the Communist system. The question isn't whether it is coming, but how and when. And replacing the empire with some form of federation or commonwealth, rather than blowing it up, is a mighty enterprise that needs to be undertaken with deliberation.

Washington's main task at this delicate stage is to make sure there are no miscalculations. If Mr. Gorbachev can make use of the argument of grave international reaction in persuading his own critics that force would be disastrous, he is more than welcome. The West has nothing to gain in tipping the scales by cutting off the peaceful option. □